

CONSERVATION CORNER

Enhancing Panthertown

BY MOLLY PHILLIPS

Hikers, backpackers, equestrians, fishermen, ecologists, mountain bikers and photographers—for any outdoor enthusiast, there is hardly a more unique place to explore than Panthertown, an oasis found off NC 281 in Jackson County, just outside of Cashiers.

Inside the valley, a network of hiking trails laces the 6,700-acre tract of protected land, with cliff-top views, at least eight major waterfalls, trout streams, rare plant species and diverse habitat for wildlife.

Panthertown is part of the Nantahala National Forest and is a

designated Blue Ridge National Heritage Area. More than 30 miles of public trails have been created and maintained by the Friends of Panthertown, a group of volunteers who work with the U.S. Forest Service to conserve Panthertown Valley and improve the quality and experience of recreational opportunities in the area.

“We are the feet on the ground,” says Margaret Carton of Cashiers, president of Friends of Panthertown. “We maintain the trails, put steps in around waterfalls and host conservation education programs.”

The nonprofit also works to enhance the visitor experience, beginning at the primary public entrances on both the east and west side of the valley. So when the 16-acre property that borders the western entrance to Panthertown Valley and Salt Rock Gap became available for sale by a private landowner, the group knew acquiring it would greatly benefit the public. Carton says the increased visitation and limited access to the western entrance has long been an issue.

“On any given summer day, you can

see 50 cars lined up on either side of a fairly narrow dirt road, surrounded by private property,” she says. “Owning these 16 acres would enrich the user experience as soon as they arrive with enhanced trail access, good camping and better, safer parking.”

But a land acquisition project like this was not something Friends of Panthertown had experience doing. “When this opportunity came up, we realized we didn’t have the skill set, breadth of fundraising, or the donor base to pull it off—large scale real estate projects are not in our scope of work,” Carton explains. “Fortunately, we developed a great partnership with Mainspring Conservation Trust, and we are excited about the possibilities.”

Mainspring Conservation Trust is a regional nonprofit land trust based out of Franklin that conserves the waters, forests, farms and heritage of the six westernmost counties in North Carolina and northern Rabun County, Georgia.

Mainspring is currently working with the Friends of Panthertown to raise \$195,000 to purchase the tract, which is key to public access, before it is sold for development. Mainspring executive director Sharon Taylor says purchasing the property to eventually transfer to the Forest Service fits perfectly into the

20-year-old nonprofit’s mission. “Not only are we conserving the viewshed from inside Panthertown, but we’re also providing public access to people so they can enjoy nature and all its wonders.”

Once the land is purchased, a parking area will be created to help with the visitor traffic flow, in addition to protecting the view from inside Panthertown Valley. “If a development occurs on the knoll along the property, it would be seen in the view looking back from Salt Rock, Little Green Mountain and Big Green Mountain,” says Taylor. “Our goal is to instead allow visitors to be enveloped in the full outdoor experience, and truly feel like they are in the wilderness, from the minute they leave their car.”

Both Friends of Panthertown and Mainspring Conservation Trust are excited to partner on this project. Carton sums it up: “To do something valuable that connects people to the nature here, where they can come and unplug and just be present. That’s the lasting legacy I’d like to see.”

Mainspring Conservation Trust has secured a private donor who will match any donation given towards this project. Participate in the purchase of this critical 16-acre tract of land by visiting mainspringconserves.org and clicking the Donate button. For more information, visit Mainspring’s website or call 828.524.2711.



Protected view from Salt Rock Gap. Photo by Tim Robison